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**A Review of: Michael James Slouber: Gāruḍa Medicine: A History of
Snakebite and Religious Healing in South Asia**

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-70232>

Scientific Publication in Electronic Form

Published Version

Originally published at:

Wujastyk, Dagmar (2012). A Review of: Michael James Slouber: Gāruḍa Medicine: A History of Snakebite and Religious Healing in South Asia. China: Dissertation Reviews.

Gāruḍa Medicine: A History of Snakebite and Religious Healing in South Asia. By MICHAEL JAMES SLOUBER. University of California, Berkeley, 2012. 331 pp. Primary Advisors: Professor Robert P. Goldman, Professor Alexander von Rospatt.

In his dissertation, Michael Slouber introduces the reader to a branch of Śaiva tantric literature called the Gāruḍa Tantras, works associated with the deity Garuḍa (the Lord of Birds and natural enemy of snakes and poison) that are primarily concerned with the cure of snakebite and poisoning through the use of mantras and herbal or mineral remedies, but that also touch on broader medical and religious matters.

The dissertation is divided into two parts. The first part provides a general introduction to Gāruḍa Tantras and the themes presented in them, as well as a discussion of how their contents are positioned within the Śaiva corpus of works and how they relate to other schools of thought. The second part consists of an edition and translation of chapters 1- 7, 30 and 34 of the *Kriyākālaguṇottara*, a previously unpublished Sanskrit text that preserves archaic material from the Gāruḍa Tantras and that probably dates to before the eleventh century.

Part one, chapter 1 introduces and contextualises Gāruḍa medicine, the method of treating envenomation and poisoning with mantra systems and herbal or mineral cures expounded in the Gāruḍa Tantras. Slouber's focus is on the treatment of snakebite with mantras, an aspect of Indian medicine that has not received much scholarly attention in the past despite it being a popular and widespread practice. Slouber cogently argues that the scholarly bias against practices such as mantras and ritualized medicine has resulted in an inaccurate understanding of Indian medicine. The second chapter gives an extensive survey of primary textual sources in Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit that relate to or incorporate elements of Gāruḍa medicine, tentatively establishing the relations of influence between the texts. The impressively wide range of sources include Vedic texts, the Epics, Ayurvedic treatises, Purāṇas, Śaiva Tantras and Śaiva compendia, Pāñcarātra Tantras and other Vaiṣṇava texts, Jain and Buddhist sources. In Chapter 3, Slouber delineates Gāruḍa mantra systems, describing and analyzing selected mantras and their use in some detail. Emphasizing the cultural importance of mantras as well as the coherent inner logic of their use, Slouber advocates a more detailed study and serious consideration of mantras.

Chapter 4 examines the role of snakebite goddesses in the Gāruḍa Tantras and their incorporation into the later Śākta traditions of the ninth to twelfth centuries. There is also a discussion of the use of *vidyās*, i.e., sonic spells understood as the embodiment of the goddess and as the female equivalent of mantras. In chapter 5, Slouber explores Garuḍa's non-sectarian identity as an independent deity in Śaiva, Śākta, Buddhist, and Jain traditions and discusses why Garuḍa is today mostly associated with Vaiṣṇavism. He also describes in some detail how the visualization of Garuḍa's specific qualities is used by the practitioner, the *Gāruḍika*, to bring about possession and cure snakebite. The sixth chapter concludes Part one, summarizing the findings of the previous chapters and suggesting directions for further research.

As mentioned, Part two contains the edition and translation of chapters 1- 7, 30 and 34 of the *Kriyākālaguṇottara*. The edition is based on three of six available manuscripts of the *Kriyākālaguṇottara*, the three others being directly dependent on the prior three, as Slouber proceeds to explain in detail. Slouber has chosen Devanāgarī fonts for the edition, which makes the text more accessible to Indian scholars. The clear and concise translation concludes Part two.

The study of Tantric traditions and literature, long a neglected area in scholarship, is now emerging as one of the key, if also specialist, areas of South Asian studies (see Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson, "Tantric Traditions." In: Jessica Frazier (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*. London, New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011, pp. 122-137).

Many of the previously unavailable Tantric source materials are gradually being made available through the archiving (cataloguing, microfilming and digitization) of important manuscript collections, and a small number of editions and translations of seminal Tantric scriptures have been published in recent years. However, the corpus of Tantric literature is vast, and while solid inroads have been made in the history of Tantric thought, much more remains to be discovered. Slouber's dissertation can be seen as part of a larger project of understanding Tantra, specifically Śaiva Tantra and its influence on South Asian culture, providing us with another piece of the puzzle, as it were. Key to this understanding is the examination of a central aspect of Tantric thought, namely the meaning and use of mantras (and vidyās) to which Slouber dedicates a great deal of attention. As Slouber points out, this is an area that has been more or less purposely overlooked or ignored in studies on Indian medicine and that certainly deserves more attention. His edition and translation of parts of the *Kriyākālagaṇottara* provides a much-welcomed glimpse into Gāruḍa literature and into snakebite medicine. This dissertation substantially adds to our understanding of Tantric thought and practice, and vitally complements our still incomplete picture of Indian medicine.

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